

Peace: The Virtue of BEAUTY

by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

Beauty is both a path toward inner peace and a path into the world. The recognition of beauty — within your self, others, objects, architecture, animals and nature — can create a warm sanctuary for the soul in daily life. How is this possible? It is because when we put a face of beauty upon the world, our heart and mind are lightened amidst the heaviness or stress of life. Perceiving beauty, therefore, becomes a means to experiencing joy and reverence, helping us to elicit kindness and gratitude along the way.

The Spirit of Beauty

*This world is nothing more than Beauty's chance to show Herself.
And what are we? —
Nothing more than Beauty's chance to see Herself.
For if Beauty were not seeking Herself, we would not exist.*
Ghalib

Poets, artists, mystics and philosophers have long spoken to the virtue of beauty as part of the human enchantment of life. As the poet Ghalib suggests above, we are but a living mirror for the universal expression of beauty. The spirit of beauty surrounds us.

Faith traditions also re-inspire our outlook on life. They remind us to find beauty in Creation, and to cast away our sorrows so that God's beauty can once again ignite our heart's flame. A spiritual path can connect us to the splendor of Creation in its outer forms, and to our moral and benevolent responsibilities to uphold Creation. But our spiritual journey can also permit us to never lose touch with that inner beauty that makes us all children of God.

The Navajo Indians of America have a philosophy of "Walking in Beauty." This means the path of beauty is that of reverence for life: honoring the sacred in everything. In the process, we are not so much moved by outward appearances but by inner qualities of that which we see or meet. The revered Japanese writer/philosopher, Soetsu Yanagi noted

that: “Even the common articles made for daily use become endowed with beauty when they are loved.”

Reflect on your own daily life: Do you take the time to honor the sacredness of people and objects and nature around you? Perhaps you can list those things toward which you attach a certain degree of affection; then determine if you are drawn to them because you also acknowledge their inherent beauty.

The Koran of the Muslim faith teaches the importance of acting beautifully: “Do what is beautiful. God loves those who do what is beautiful.” (sura 2:195) How do you interpret this thought? How does “do what is beautiful” translate into action or admiration throughout your day? Some people may cite practicing some form of art; others may proscribe beauty in making a nice dinner; still others may think a kind word or deed is an acknowledgment of a beautiful heartfelt gesture. In a simple line, the Persian mystic poet Rumi inspires us to go deeper: “Let the beauty we love be what we do.” Again, consider your life, and how what you do mirrors an inner passion for doing that which you love, even if it as simple as returning a smile for a frown.

The Hebrew Scriptures ask us to consider putting on the beauty of God in spite of our difficulties: “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction . . . and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.” (Baruch 5:1) Putting on God’s beauty is not necessarily about preaching the virtue of God or Creation. Neither is it an antidote to our habits of complaining or seeing what’s wrong in our life. A deeper interpretation suggests we see the world differently through a lens of what is meaningful and what is beautiful. Consequently, we might discover that the Spirit of beauty is all around us, all the time, and like a fish in water, we live and move within this Godly beauty, just as it lives and moves within us.

The American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson states: “Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.” Ask yourself: “What would it be like to claim sacred beauty as my birthright and to live from that place

within me all the time? How different would my daily life be if I took occasional sanctuary in “putting on the beauty of God?”

Walking the Path of Beauty

Creation Spiritualist Matthew Fox reminds us that we all share beauty: “It strikes us indiscriminately . . . There is no end to beauty for the person who is aware . . . we walk on beauty every day, even when things seem ugly around us.”

There is no better place to practice beauty in your life than in the ordinariness of your day: home, family, work, colleagues, friends, city or village, and natural surroundings. Your most familiar paths can help you recreate a beautiful response to life. Here are a few ideas to aid in your journey.

Home or Room. Clutter — too many things or tasks in front of us — can get in the way of our noticing what is beautiful about them. Start by clearing out and giving away excess possessions or things you no longer use. This action affirms a commitment to simplify your life. Then choose an area to give special attention, cleaning and redecorating in a way to beautify it. As you are doing so, admire textures, colors, craftsmanship, etc. of items. Your home or room is a refuge from the world — a safe place to desire peace. It makes all the sense in the world to let beauty live within it.

Family and Friends. Strive to see the beauty in those you hold dear: how they smile and laugh, frown and cry. But also consider the poet Gibran’s observation: “Beauty is not in the face; beauty is a light in the heart.” Strive, therefore, to see beauty within loved ones’ attempts to make meaning of life. Sure, they have good and bad moments and days, but they still wake each morning and show up for life, doing the best they can under the circumstances. You can feel more peaceful by spending time witnessing the beauty of those around you, and by finding beauty in their heart. This is what inspired the Persian mystic poet Rumi to say: “The only lasting beauty is the beauty of the heart.”

“All God’s Creatures.” There is infinite opportunity to admire the beauty in the way animals and insects carry on their lives. Favorite pets especially draw out our tenderness. However, a spider’s web or the spiral of a nautilus shell can also astonish us with their creative beauty. Watching wildlife, such as birds, squirrels and the like, similarly allows us to experience awe.

Work and School. Look for beauty in your work and school surroundings, including transit to such places. Notice the flowers or trees along the way or perhaps a water feature. Admire the ethnicity of others at work or school. Notice peoples’ clothing. Acknowledge the art or photographs you have chosen for your office or desk. In a factory, or even if you are a craftsperson, strive to see beauty in the equipment and tools you use.

City or Village. Buildings and streets are an everyday opportunity to embrace beauty. The most aesthetically designed ones are often the easiest to evoke admiration and awe. Find beauty in their architectural intent and in the way they integrate the natural environment.

Nature. The artist Vincent Van Gogh once said: “If you truly love Nature, you will find beauty everywhere.” Nature, whether we are aware of it or not, is the everyday cloak we wear in the world. This cloak is like an exquisitely interwoven tapestry, adorned with the many creations of Earth. A day without noticing Nature is like whitewashing a beautiful painting. Find a way to recognize and admire Nature, from the smallness of an errant leaf on the street to the vast blueness of the sky. Walk and play in nature; peer at it through a window. In every instance, give Nature your awe, and give nature a face worthy of your honor.

Admire the beauty of Nature’s whimsy or strength. Acknowledge your kinship with Nature, from both the scientific to the spiritual. Be inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation: “Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything that is beautiful, for beauty is

God's handwriting — a wayside sacrament. Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every flower, and thank God for it as a cup of blessing.”

Remember:

Beauty startles us out of our ordinary patterns. It both stimulates and soothes our soul. We can receive beauty and give it to others. We can feel it as pleasure that warms the mystery of life.

Albert Einstein reminds us: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

In your search for peace, embrace the power beauty has in comforting your spirit and giving you the gift of awe and wonder. Comforted thus with gratitude, leave your inner sanctuary and find a way to give beauty back to the world.

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